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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effectiveness of the West Heidelberg (Australia) Early Literacy Project (WHELP), which helps low income and working class parents develop the literacy skills of their 4-year-old children by, among other things, reading regularly to them. The project developed through three phases with three different methods of delivering books to families: 1987-1988 via home visits; 1989 via pre-schools; and 1990-1991 via pre-school teachers. The bulk of the 60 families involved in the first phase were classified as "supportive-unsophisticated." They were interested in their children's education and keen to help out but lacked knowledge and confidence in how to help their children. While the 1987-1988 program was judged to be highly successful, the home visit strategy was very costly. In the second phase, project staff visited pre-schools and read with the children, who then took books home. The third phase was implemented by pre-school teachers using books supplied by the project. Follow-up studies of all phases were undertaken. Data included tests of literacy competence, family interviews, family interview environment, the child's interest in literacy, ethnicity, and initial knowledge/awareness. Results indicated that: (1) the project had some success in involving parents from a disadvantaged locality in reading with their 4-year-old children during all three phases; (2) working through the child's enthusiasm was an effective strategy; and (3) the project was successful in affecting children's emergent literacy learning. (Seven tables of data are included; 31 references and a description of project strategies are attached.) (RS)

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REACHING OUT TO HELP LOW INCOME PARENTS FOSTER THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT. *

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REACHING OUT TO HELP LOW INCOME PARENTS FOSTER THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT. *

DEREK TOOMEY, LA TROBE UNIVERSITY,MELBOURNE

This paper reports some results of the West Heidelberg Early Literacy Project (WHELP) from 1987 - 1992. The project works to help low income and working class parents develop the literacy skills of their four year old children by, among other things, reading regularly with them.

The paper reports results to do with, 1. the management of home-school relations and reaching out to disadvantaged families, and 2. to do with effects on children's literacy competence.

1.THE USE OF REACH OUT STRATEGIES

A great deal of research has shown that children's family environments are rather more predictive of their school learning than indicators of their socio-economic status or "social class" (Toomey, 1989a; Scott-Jones, 1984; Hess and Holloway, 1984; White, 1982). In other words at each socio-economic level there are great differences between family environments in their influence in children's schooling. The lack of responsiveness of schools in disadvantaged localities to this variation can actually exacerbate educational disadvantage. In an earlier study (Toomey, 1986) I worked with Year 1 (Kindergarten) teachers to involve parents in disadvantaged localities in their childrens literacy development. Typically the teachers only worked with parents who came into the school to find out how they could help their children at home, they tended to ignore those who did not come into the school. Yet our evaluation found that many of the parents reluctant to visit the school were trying to do things to help their children's literacy development at home eg: by reading with them. We also found many of these parents were quite unsure of themselves and what they should do in this quasi-teaching role. Our most successful project was one based on home visits to parents of pre-schoolers (Toomey, Keck and Atkinson, 1986). Generally speaking the teachers preferred to work with the "enthusiastic" parents who

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willingly entered the school and who were confident in their educational role. These parents tended to give very positive feedback to the teachers, who thus were encouraged to continue the program, even though it did little for the low contact parents. Subsequent research in other schools (Toomey, 1989b) showed the gap between the literacy achievements of the low contact and high contact parents' children widened significantly over a three year period, even when initial differences in family supportiveness and the children's literacy development were taken into account (Toomey 1989b). Figure 1 presents a typology of parents from this research.

WHELP was born out of this background. It was decided to work with families of four year olds a) because of the importance of the earlier years in fostering children's literacy development (Teale, 1985) and b) to get away from the predisposing attitudes of many teachers towards disadvantaged parents. It was also decided to run the project via home visits to have a genuine "reach out" strategy. Eventually from 1989 onwards it was decided to work via pre-schools as a more cost effective strategy.

OPERATION OF THE PROJECT

The project developed through three phases with three different methods of delivering books to families: a) 1987 - 1988 via home visits, b) 1989 via pre-schools, c) 1990-1991 via pre-school teachers.

The Home Visit Phase The target population was all families with children who were to begin school in February, 1988 at two particular schools, some 82 families. Families were recruited via contacts with pre-schools, the schools and the Infant Welfare Clinics. Eleven families declined to be involved, 2 declined after initially joining; we failed to contact 7 in spite of many attempts and 3 left the area before we could contact them. Two families were assessed as not needing our help after an initial assessment interview. We suspect that a number of refusals fitted into this category.

Of the 60 families we worked with some 51.8 per cent were single parent families; all of the males were unemployed or in semi or unskilled occupations; 42 percent of parents left school before Grade 10, 48 percent at Grade 10 and 10 percent above Grade 10. All live in Public Housing.

The aim was to give families relatively intensive contact (ie: one visit per week) until they were judged to be self-operating, at which point they are phased out of the program of visits and replaced by another

family. Visits continued into 1988 until the whole group had been dealt with. On average each family received books for a period of eight weeks.

Evaluation of the 1987 - 1988 Program

Information for evaluation purposes was obtained from:

1.Weekly Visits. The visitor kept a record of the parents' and childrens' progress and of any significant incidents or information.

2.Structured Interviews which took place at the first or second visit. Among other things these made possible: an assessment of the initial supportiveness of the home for reading development on a 25 item scale, and b) an assessment of the child's interest in literacy on a 15 item scale. Information was also gained on the child's initial literacy competence, as reported by the parent and using performance tests. The weekly visits also allowed the visitor to add to these assessments with other information. c) a follow up interview was done in 1988 to obtain parents' evaluations of the program.

Results of the 1987-88 Project In this section attention will be paid to results to do with the implementation of the project and parents reactions to it.

a)The importance of the child's enjoyment We found that the key to involving parents was the child's enjoyment of being read to. At the initial visit the home visitor would read a story to the child with the parent present, reading with much expression and dramatic involvement. Any doubts the parent had about becoming involved were usually removed on their seeing their child's enjoyment and this became an important factor in maintaining parental involvement. The children would look forward to each visit and participate actively in the choice of books.

This enjoyment lead the children to frequently request reading sessions and helped to maintain the momentum of the program. The home visitors reading to the child also had the effect of showing parents how to read with expression. Some of them had already tried reading to the child, but without success, because of their reading in a monotone. Remarks were made to the home visitor such as " I try to do it like you now and she loves it"

b) A classification of parents This section will present a categorisation of parents' reactions to the program from our guiding perspectives set out in Figure One.

On entry to the program each parent received a detailed interview using structured and opened ended questions designed to assess the level of literacy support in the home and to give some general indication of support for the child's education. After each visit detailed notes were kept about the parents' progress in supporting the child's literacy development and any other relevant information about the child and the family. The home visitor has produced the following categorisation after a lengthy process of analysis and discussion with the senior researcher. An initial list of categories was produced with discussion and checking in the files about individual cases. This categorisation remained the subject of discussion over a two month period. After a decision had been made on which categories to use, each family was placed in the scheme by consulting the detailed notes on each

case. This entailed frequent discussion with the senior researcher. During this process an extra category was added. One month later the home visitor produced a description of each case and during this process the validity of the classification received a further test.

The senior researcher then made an independent classification of each family. The level of agreement was 86 percent. Discrepant classifications were then discussed and reclassified.

1.Supportive-sophisticated One parent stood out from the rest as especially interested in her children's education and relatively confident and sophisticated in how she supported it. She was very encouraging of her children's language development, talking with them often, asking their opinions and promoting their critical thinking. She encouraged the use of 'decontextualised' language e.g. speaking in complete sentences. She asked 'How' as well as 'What' questions. She also voiced firm beliefs that children have rights e.g. to make decisions for themselves. She also encouraged them to have their own opinions e.g. about events in the news or issues arising at school. The family environment was scored at a high level on the literacy support scale. This mother was a member of the School Council and the pre-school teacher said that she felt intimidated by her confident and articulate manner. Two other mothers probably belong in this category but not at such a high level of sophistication. Altold about five percent of parents could be classified in this way.

2.Supportive-unsophisticated. The bulk of the parents, some sixty-three percent fall into this group. They are extremely interested in their children's education and keen to help in it but, generally speaking,

lacking in knowledge and confidence in how to go about this. There are considerable variations within the group, one or two being on the borderline of group one. Some of the parents had already been doing some of the activities we suggest e.g. reading to the child, providing pencils and paper, teaching the alphabet, writing words or pointing out environmental print. However, the frequency of reading to the children and the supply of books did not reach the desired level. Some had already read to their children but without success because of the absence of expression and had given up. Modelling by the home visitor, and the use of audio tapes led to a definite improvement in all such cases. One such parent, Jocelyn, remarked "I really enjoy doing it now". Others had bought books on child development and preparing for school. But overall, these parents who were already engaged in support activities were seeking confirmation and guidance. They tended to be unsure whether they were doing the "right thing". For example they would ask questions about whether to teach sounds or letter names for the alphabet and whether to read favourite books or encourage variety. Others had been rather less active and were more unsure about what to do, though very keen to help. Some of them read to their child with the child facing them, holding up the book for the child to see (following the kindergarten teachers' practice in reading to the group). This second group probably corresponds to the 'low contact group' referred to in the introduction. We cannot be certain of this because we had no initial information about their readiness to visit the school and their confidence in dealing with teachers. As indicated below, a number of them did become involved in the school. But it seems that this, in part, was a result of the program. Some of the remaining categories have rather fluid membership. This category at its largest might contain some seventy one percent of the parents in the project, rather than the sixty-three percent mentioned above. But this merely serves to emphasise how tentative this classification scheme must be.

3.<u>Supportive-independent minded</u> This small group of parents were interested in helping their children's education but, initially resistant to advice and critical of professionals working in schools and preschools. For example Holly's child was due to be four and a half at the beginning of the school year and both the preschool teacher and the home visitor advised keeping the child home for another year. Holly was unwilling to heed this advice. A similar situation was seen in two or three other cases, although these were in families with at least two or three other children of pre-school age. Holly thought that keeping

her child back for a year would be a sign of low confidence in her child's ability. Lisa was extremely critical of the fact that her child had had three different teachers in the first weeks of beginning school, and had she the transport resources would have moved the child to another school. We intend no criticism of these parents by classifying them in this way and their reasons for being resistant may well be justified. The typology described above needs modifying to accomodate these parents, who were, generally, confident in their own opinions vis-a-vis those of teachers and willing to visit the school. However, they were not 'enthusiasts' but were willing to support their children's education at school e.g. by buying them books, teaching children to write their names, reading to them, providing pencils and paper etc. It should be stressed that membership of this category is fluid and that over time a number of parents became less critical and resistant. For example, one parent was involved in a custody hearing for the care of the child and was extremely suspicious of the intentions of our project. Eventually she became an enthusiastic supporter of the project.

4. Supportive - stressed This group of parents are interested in their children's education and want to help, but often this has a reduced priority compared with other more fundamental problems of survival e.g. custody issues, being raided by the police, domestic violence, sickness, supporting extended kin, emotional stress in marital relations, pregnancy, having many pre-school aged children, financial problems, hunger , drug dependency. One of the schools asked the home visitor to continue with home visits with a number of families and not to phase them out of the program. Presumably this was because of the child's level of literacy development. All of these children except one come from this category. Membership of this group is also fluid due to changing circumstances. When the pressure is lifted most of these families would be classed in the second category. At most about thirteen per cent of the families fell into this group. This group approximates more to the 'uninvolved' category in our opening typology.

5. 'Non-Coping' The one family in this category approximates to the stereotype of the 'undeserving poor'. This parent agreed to be in the program but in effect did not participate. Appointments were repeatedly missed, books were lost and little attempt appeared to have been made to follow the work of the program. The mother herself was not literate and had a problematic extra-marital affair. She was

involved with a number of welfare agencies in the area e.g. Community Services Victoria. Outreach.Adult Literacy. She had three pre-school children who at one time during the years were in care.This family has not been placed in the 'supportive-stressed' category because we believe that the parent had fundamental problems in performing the parental role which were not simply the result of stressful circumstances. Though we resist the tendency to stigmatise the poor and disadvantaged from a 'person blame' perspective, it has to be recognised that not all parents are suited to being involved in the program and that we may do them and their children no service in asking them to be involved. It is possible that we merely succeed in raising the level of guilt and sense of pressure without helping the child.

(c) An assessment of the extent of take-up of the program during the period of home visits will now be made. This is based on the home visitor's informal observations and discussions with the parents as well as a follow-up, evaluation interview in mid 1988.

It was judged that all parents in the 'supportive-sophisticated' and the 'supportive-unsophisticated' categories were reading regularly to their children. The one 'non-coping' parent was not. Of the other two categories about half of them were doing so, as far as we could tell. This

indicates a 'success rate' of about 86 percent. This also leaves out the refusals. There is little doubt in our minds that this success rate is due to the regular supply of books delivered in such a convenient way. The larger of the two schools involved would not allow Year One children to borrow books from the library and the books sent home by the classroom teachers appear to be from a reading series, intended for the children to read to the parent.We received many unfavourable comments on the supply of books from the school. The school provided a library of attractive books for parents to borrow and read to their children. We are informed that only four of the parents in the program used this library. This is clear evidence of the need to reach out to parents and of the efficacy of a method of delivering books which bridges the home-school gap. Ideally children should take home books regularly from the class library, their choices being guided and known about by the teacher. It is the home visitor's judgement that most of the families who have been reading regularly to their children would continue to do so, provided they had a regular supply of books.

(d)The need for short books many of the children in the program had not been read to regularly before, or before their pre-school year. Consequently, in many cases their attention span for listening to a story was limited. Also, many of the mothers were not used to reading and preferred short books to read aloud. The visitor left behind five books at each weekly visit and attempted to adjust the length of the books to the competence and interests of the child and the parent, with an appropriate admixture of books of differing lengths, after having given the child some choice. In this way an attempt was made to build up the child's and parent's tolerance of longer books.

In buying books we tried to build up a supply of short books with repetitive and predictable patterns (Ryan and Snowball,1986; Bridge, 1985) and themes and language likely to appeal to this group.

McCormick and Mason (1986a) report a project in the U.S.A. in which short books were repeatedly read to four year olds in pre-school to the point at which they could recite them. Packages of the books were then mailed home to the parents and it appears from the evaluation that this led to the parents reading to the children more frequently than in a comparison group, with ensuing benefits for the children's literacy development. The success of the project was later replicated with a sample of disadvantaged families with children at Headstart Centres (McCormick and Mason.1986b).

We have also found that the kind of books carried by supermarkets and newsagents tends to differ from those for sale in bookshops. Parents in disadvantaged localities tend to have access to the former rather than the latter. The variety tends to be limited and often the language quality is not so rich. Obtaining short, predictable books with rich language from the supermarkets is more difficult.

(e)Effect on home-school relations Although not a prime aim of the project, we have tried to improve the parents' confidence and competence in dealing with the school. This has had some influence on parents' participation in the school.

For example at one school the induction program for parents held towards the end of 1987 was attended by twenty parents, whereas normally only about five people would have been expected to turn up, also we were informed by the school's vice-principal who was in no doubt that this was a result of the program. The Parents Club also saw a considerable increase in attendance after the home visitor encouraged parents to attend, at the request of the school. A number of parents in the

project are members of the School Council and, generally speaking, the parents have shown a greater readiness to be involved in the school e.g. in the Infant level motor program.

(f)The Importance of personal contact The home visitor has become a well-known figure in the locality and was greeted warmly by the children in the neighbourhood and the school. This created an identity for her which made access to the families easier, since many parents and children knew about her in advance. Her visits were usually welcomed and she often found that people asked her for advice on all manner of problems e.g. custody issues, the school achievements of elder siblings of the target child, marital problems, choice of schools and when to begin school and adult literacy. We are in little doubt that the project's success was largely due to the element of personal contact.

The 1989,1990 and 1991 Programs

While the 1987 - 88 Program was judged to be highly successful in involving the target group of families, the home visit strategy was very costly. It had shown that it is possible to obtain a relatively high level of involvement of parents reading to their children in a disadvantaged locality.

The finding that the child's enjoyment of being read to was a critical factor encouraged us to think of working via the pre-schools, where we could find a captive group of pre-schoolers to enthuse about reading and a cheap distribution point for the books. The success of a similar project by McCormick and Mason (1986a,1986b) gave some support to this approach.

The 1989 Program Accordingly, the program was implemented by working in four pre-schools in the locality, one of which was chosen because over seventy percent of families were of non-English speaking backgrounds. The program was run entirely by project staff who visited the pre-schools to read with the children, attempting to enthuse them about reading. Books were sent home with the children for parents to read to them, after having obtained the agreement of the parents to participate. Two instruction sessions for parents were held and pamphlets and alphabet friezes were sent home to the parents. The children took home three books twice a week for a six month period. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest the strong value for literacy development of the child becoming very familiar with some books (Snow,1983;Snow,Dubber and de Blauw,1982;Martinez and Teale,1988;Morrow,1988;Moerk,1985;Dowhower,1987) and of having repetitive elements within books

(Martinez and Teale,1988). The argument is that the familiarity and redundancy involved encourages the child's mastery. Accordingly, after a phase in which encouraging the child's interest was paramount, we moved to a phase, during the last seven weeks of the program, in which the child was given much contact with a small number of books. We introduced class sets of short books, with repetitive elements, reading them aloud to the children several times and sending a copy of the book home with each child. Some five books were introduced to each child this way.Each of the pre-schools had a morning and an afternoon group. We operated the program with one of the groups and used the alternate group for comparison purposes. There were sixty-eight in the project group for whom we have complete data, and 32 in the comparison group.The 1990 Program repeated the 1989 program, but was implemented by the pre-school teachers using books supplied by the project. The data from the 1989 comparison group were used for comparative purposes. Also a post test only comparison was made with students from a nearby pre-school having a similar catchment area. Also one pre-school was dropped from the program because our data suggested it had a relatively high proportion on non-disadvantaged families. It was replaced with another pre-school.The 1991 Program was the same as the 1990 Program, with the exception that the evaluation design included analysis of a comparison group with pre and post tests. The variables used in this design were the same as in 1989, with the exception that the post project test variables were : the print knowledge tests also used in the pre-test and a measure of the childs understanding of the meaningfulness of print. A small number of the pre-test variables were also omitted.(to do with ethnicity and parental illiteracy).Follow up studies We followed up the students in the 1989 program by asking their school teachers in November,1990 and in March 1992 to make assessments of their literacy development using the Griffin Literacy Profile (Griffin, 1989), described below. We also followed up the 1991 cohort in March 1992, in the same way.Each of these follow-up studies suffered a large amount of attrition.

2.Influences on Children's Literacy Competence.

The view taken in this research is that children learn a great deal within the home in the process of general upbringing. This is 'natural' (Teale,1984) or 'acquisition' (Holloway,1990) learning which results from the child's active efforts to learn rather than an adult's deliberate intention to teach. The

learning is also tied to outcomes with real life meaning e.g. efforts to talk, to eat, to sing, because it occurs in a context of normal everyday activities, unlike school learning situations in which the learning is often devoid of everyday meaning e.g. phonic drills, rote learning tasks.

Much learning within the family is adult assisted but is 'natural' in the above sense in that it involves the adult simplifying the task for the child until the child can operate independently, e.g. holding toddler's hands to assist them to walk, then taking away one hand, then another. This scaffolding support is provided for naturally occurring behaviour. e.g. parents will simplify the language they use with a young child.("motherese") to assist the child acquiring meaning (Snow and Ferguson, 1977). In parent/child bookreading episodes, parents reading an unfamiliar book and with younger children are more likely to supply world knowledge and word meanings for understanding but with books more familiar to the child and with older children are more likely to ask questions which require more intellectual effort by the child, e.g. making predictions or drawing inferences which require a grasp of the meaning of the text. That is, parents increase their demands as the child becomes more competent or knowledgeable (Goodsit et al., 1988).In these ways children acquire a great deal of knowledge in the home which is required for School success (Scott-Jones 1984).

<u>The development of literacy skills out of oral language skills</u>

Rubin(1989) has reviewed a number of studies which, taken together, suggest that command of spoken language facilitates children's reading comprehension. But he argues against the view that reading competence is no more than oral language comprehension ability plus de-coding skills. He outlines a number of ways in which the conversations which constitute the bulk of young children's experience of oral language, differ from the kind of written texts children are required to understand in school. His analysis is presented below. (See also Donaldson, 1984 and Chafe, 1982).

1. Normally in conversations the parties concerned are physically present and share the same temporal framework. Transmitting meaning may be much assisted by the use of extra-verbal devices such as gesture, posture, facial expression, changes in emphasis, pitch, tone and speed of speech, use of pausing and indicating physically present objects. In print some of the functions of these devices are carried out by the use of punctuation, italics or underlining and paragraphing. Words such as 'here,' 'there,' 'left'

and 'right' may carry a different connotation in conversation. With written text usually the readers have to understand a spatial frame of reference which exists independently of their own immediate one. Above all, in written texts of the kind we are dealing with, the words have to convey meaning entirely on their own. In this sense the meanings must be 'de contextualised' or 'situation-independent'.

2. Conversationalists share a temporal frame of reference which gives special meaning to terms such as 'today''tomorrow''a few years ago'. Readers of say, a story, have to become oriented to a temporal frame of reference different from their own and defined or implied by the writer.

3. Conversations are interactional so that utterances may be tailored to the peculiar needs to understand of individuals, whereas in school texts the addressee will usually be on anonymous generalised other. Young children may have more difficulty in understanding a number of different points of view from individuals when referred to in books, than when those persons are physically present. Also, usually all that the reader will know about the characters referred to in books is what the book says about them. Children are likely to be quite familiar with the background of conversationalists at home.

4.Usually print is permanent whereas speech is ephemeral. The writer cannot usually so easily be asked to explain his or her meaning and the words have to convey meaning unambiguously without other extra-verbal aids to meaning (as with gesture etc) with the exception of diagrams and illustrations. The permanence of print means that it can be re-read, frequently if necessary. Its permanence can thus be used to compensate for the absence of some of the extra-verbal aids to meaning referred to above.

5. The writer has usually much more time to plan than the conversationalist (Chafe,1982). Studies of adult writer-speakers suggest that written language,as a result, tends to be much more closely packed with meaning (Chafe,1982). This is achieved by the use of more complex syntax in which adverbial and adjectival clauses and phrases are used to modify nouns. This is aided by the fact that spoken language is more likely to use pronouns which cannot be thus modified, for deictic reference.

However, no studies of this kind have been identified, in this research, which compare young children's experience of spoken and written language with respect to its syntactic complexity. While children's command of spoken language is an important resource for their literacy development there are important differences between conversation in the home and the decontextualised written language of school books.

The central contention of this research is that reading children's literature aloud to children is an important way of bridging this gap for it gives children familiarity with the language of de-contextualized texts, through the medium of speech, with all its extra-verbal aids to convey meaning, and without the necessity for acquiring skills of decoding written language. Not only that,it assists children to imagine non-present objects and events and relationships; it assists them in thinking about such objects, events and relationships in both spatial and temporal frames of reference different from their own and it habituates them to taking the role of the member of an anonymous audience. In short it assists them to think about the world at a distance as it is known to them via symbolic referents alone. Further, in discussion of the text, children are learning to perform mental operations on representations of ideas, objects and events mediated solely by symbolic means. A great deal of school work has this character-learning about the world at a distance via language and performing mental operations on the knowledge required. It is possible to gain all these benefits from experience of decontextualised spoken language as with traditional stories in an oral tradition. But in parent-child story book reading sessions we find a well established and validated cultural practice which offers many opportunities for 'natural' learning and requires little by the way of formal teaching of the parents concerned. In this approach the young child's experience of story books begins as spoken language, issuing from the adult but, hopefully, will later involve experience with the print in the books. Appendix One indicates strategies appropriate to the spoken language and written language sections of this development. It must be emphasised that parents are encouraged to take a non-didactic approach, with the expectation that children will learn and parents will assist their learning by the 'natural' methods referred to above.

Following from the ideas set out above, the focus in parent-child relations was on parents reading to children as a naturally occuring everyday activity, with little by way of a didactic program. Appendix One sets out the strategies we encouraged in the program, emphasising the move from oral-language oriented to written oriented experience.

MEASURES USED:

Literacy Competence

The children were tested in the pre-school using the Sulzby test of emergent literacy development (Sulzby, 1985). This involves the child pretending to 'read', to an adult, a book of their choice, familiar to them. The reading is video-taped and the child's performance classified on a twelve category hierarchy from simple labelling activity to independent reading. The hierarchy reflects the transition from oral-language related responses to print-governed responses mentioned above. The Sulzby test was administered at the beginning and end of the program. In addition, the children were tested at the end of the program by asking them to choose one of the five 'familiar' books we had used, though this test was not carried out with the comparison group.

Other tests of literacy competence used in the pre-school were: letter recognition, ability to read and write own name, recognition of environmental print with and without logo and concepts about print. We also used mothers' reports of: the child's ability to write his/her name, recognition of environmental print, letter recognition, alphabet knowledge and the number of words he or she could write.

Family interview

Shortly after the commencement of the project, each child's mother was interviewed at home and was asked to give an account of the literacy environment of the home before the project commenced, using a structured interview. From the information obtained, various scales were developed, which are included in those listed below, with the number of items and coefficients previously established (Toomey and Sloane, 1991).

General Family Support for School Learning

(=.84; items = 8) A scale indicating the general supportiveness of the family environment to school achievement. Items include: prescence of rules about T.V. watching; parent watches T.V. with child; Sesame Street or Play School watched; parent discusses T.V. with child; family takes the Age newspaper; two parent family; high rating on family support for literacy learning by the interviewer; high rating by interviewer of amount of parent/child interaction during book reading sessions.

Family Literacy environment (= .7667; 11 items)

A scale indicating the supportiveness of the family environment for the child's literacy development. Examples are: frequency of reading to children, amount of parent-child interaction in reading episodes, family library membership, mothers reading of books.

SES (= .7685; 5 items)

Parents' education and occupations were the main items.

Child's interest in reading and writing (= .7250; 11 items)

Examples: looks at books while alone, incorporates books into play, asks to borrow and buy books, asks to write.

Parental illiteracy

A scale indicating the number of parents having reading difficulties in the family (0, 1, 2).

Ethnicity (= .82; items = 4)

Child's country of birth, parents' country of birth; mother's spoken language fluency; mother's ability to read English. (Information from the pre-school teachers was used for this scale). Low scores indicate mainstream characteristics.

Initial Knowledge/Awareness (α = .8169; 9 items);

Ability to read and write name, asking of questions during reading episodes, recognition of environmental print, number of words can write, alphabet knowledge and letter recognition. (Items both from the performance tests and the mothers' reports were used). A sub scale for this test consisted of items from performance tests used with the children (as distinct from parents reports.) These consisted of: recognition of environmental print, with and without logo, letter recognition, knowledge of concepts about print, ability to read and write own name.(α = .81 number of items = 5).

For the 1990 and 1991 Programs in addition, at the post-test, we repeated the performance measures of literacy competence used in the pre-test. We then compared the children's performance on these tests and on the Sulzby post-test with the performance of children from a nearby pre-school, using a post-test only comparison (n = 42).

RESULTS

Table One sets out correlations between the major variables in the study. It is based largely on the pooled data for the 1989,1990 and 1991 Programs. However in 1991 some variables were left out, notably the ethnicity variables and parental illiteracy, the correlations for these are based on the 1989 and 1990 data alone. The correlations with School Literacy (based on the Griffin Literacy Profiles) are from the 1989 study.

The notion of emergent literacy is recent and there is no developed tradition of measuring emergent literacy behaviour. By its very nature this concept requires measures meaningful to the children and as a consequence, the measures are somewhat informal, and were, for the most part, especially developed for this study. It is reassuring that the various measures give validity to one another, though the level of intercorrelation is in most cases modest. The .60 correlation of initial print knowledge/awareness with school literacy score is of some note.

In line with the claims made in the inrtoduction, the family environment appears to be more predictive of the children's literacy competences than socio-economic status. Table Two presents the results of our analysis showing the amount of variation predicted in the various measures of literacy competence by (a) SES and (b) family environment variables, using a method of analysis which maximises the amount of variation to be predicted by the socio-economic variable i.e. by forced entry it was entered first in a multiple regression analysis, the other family environment variables were entered, as a block, next. In spite of this, they predicted a larger amount of variation in the children's initial print knowledge/awareness interest in literacy and in each of the Sulzby measures of emergent literacy competence. This is consistent with a good deal of other evidence. Thus it came as a surprise when a rather different pattern emerged in predicting the children's literacy competences in school, as indicated by the Griffin Literacy Profile (Griffin, 1989). This is a check list of literacy competences grouped together in a seven part hierarchy. Children are rated as to whether (a) they have mastered the competence in the grouping and display them as a behaviour pattern (Score 3) (b) this pattern of behaviour is developing, some having been mastered, and others not (Score 2) (c) the student is beginning to show the behaviour pattern (Score 1) and (d) the student shows none of the behaviour in

question (Score 0). The resulting seven scores are summed to produce the total score. The groupings of behaviour are based upon a substantial empirical survey of the behaviours teachers report as relevant to assessing literacy competence and a good deal of analysis of these results, as well as the use of standardised texts to establish validity. This form of testing is particularly appropriate in a school system which has school-based curriculum development, the widespread adoption of a whole language approach and little use of basal reading schemes. The literacy profiles have been officially adopted by the Victorian Ministry of Education. Table Two also shows the results of the same analysis using various measures from the literacy profiles as the dependant variables. Here we see socio-economic status as rather more predictive than the family environment variables.

The children from the 1989 cohort were widely scattered in 36 different schools. This meant that many of them were assessed by teachers as individual cases or as one of a small number, so they were not ranked within their school classes. This could have allowed more bias in the teachers' judgements than would otherwise have been the case, perhaps encouraging a halo effect whereby those of a higher SES were perceived more favourably. There is evidence, from systematic studies, that teachers are prone to this kind of bias (Mazer, 1971; Cooper, Baron and Lowe, 1975.) On the other hand the results may flow from the superior learning opportunities of children in schools recruiting from populations of higher socio-economic status.

Effects of the Program on Children's Literacy Competences

The approach taken in this research lays great stress on the transition from a stage in which the child's oral language competences are dominant to one in which the child begins to acquire a greater knowledge of the written language. Sulzby's (1985) test of emergent literacy development reflects this transition. Children are asked to 'read' a book they know, their reading is videotaped, and is classified on a twelve point hierarchy from simple labelling activity through to independent reading, the major division being between oral language related behaviour, and written language related behaviour. Table 3 compares the members of the 1989 project with their comparison group in their performance on the Sulzby test before and after the project. Whereas before the project there was little difference in the proportions giving written language orientated responses, after the project there were substantial differences in favour of the

project group. The same is true of the 1990 cohort though the differences were not as great as in 1989 (Table 3). This appears to give substantial support to the value of the project. Nor can the results be explained by differences in the backgrounds of the project and comparison groups. In fact, on the average the 1989 control group had slightly more advantageous backgrounds.(Toomey and Sloane, 1991). An analysis of variance, controlling for the child's initial literacy competence, initial Sulzby score and the various family environment indicators, confirmed the above results.(Table 4A). The same is true for the 1990 Project.(Table 4B).In 1990 we also carried out a post-test only comparison with students from a pre-school in a suburb of similar socio-economic backgrounds, using the Sulzby test and repeating the tests of initial literacy competence used in the study. The project group significantly out performed the comparison group on each of these tests.(Table 5).

Effects on print knowledge/awareness

The 1991 study repeated the performance tests of initial print knowledge/awareness both as a pre and a post-test. The results (Table 4C) showed the project group to be significantly ahead of the comparison group on this test, controlling for initial performance on the tests and on the Sulzby pre-test as well as interest in literacy and the various family background measures (though ethnicity and parental illiteracy were left out in 1991).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

1.We had some success in involving parents from a disadvantaged locality in reading with their four year old children (a) via home visits,(b) by working in pre-schools and (c) by having pre-school teachers send home books with the children. However, the home visit program showed a lower level of success with the families suffering special difficulties and it seems likely that some of the families in the pre-school based projects had difficulties of this kind. Our evaluation suggested that we were not entirely successful in engaging all the families of pre-schoolers, as we would have wished. In working through pre-schools it was our intention to encourage the pre-school teachers to make home visits to the families needing most support, but we were quite unsuccessful in this. The pre-school teachers were quite firm they did not have the time to do this. We also have to bear in mind that some families do not use pre-

schools - about 18 per cent in Melbourne (Ochiltree, 1992). These are likely to be the more impecunious families, so we must regard our success as limited. We did make some attempt to contact these families but our resources were too limited to do anything extended.

There is a clear role for special assistance for families particularly in need of help, assistance targeted towards those needing it, and not squandered on those not. At the same time, it is clear that pre-schools can be used successfully as the base for a home reading program.

2. Working through the child's enthusiasm was clearly an effective strategy. The accent must be on the child's enjoyment of books.

3. The project does seem to have been successful in affecting children's emergent literacy learning, with respect to both print knowledge, extracting meaning from being read to and showing more written language oriented behaviour in dealing with books.

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APPENDIX ONE

WEST HEIDELBERG EARLY LITERACY PROJECT: STRATEGIES

STAGE ONE: SPEECH-RELATED STRATEGIES

1. Making the book like speech - reading aloud with expression

When the child first encounters print which it cannot read, the print has to be transformed into spoken language acceptable to the child i.e. the print has to be read aloud to the child with expression. Some parents need showing how to do this.

This is a crucial stage in involving the parent. Getting the parent to see the child's enjoyment of a story read by an experienced teacher is usually extremely helpful in enlisting the parent's help.

2. Explaining the text and providing contextual support

Parents are encouraged to do all they can to ensure the child understands by breaking up the text with explanation and the use of contextual clues: introductory scene-setting remarks, making connections with the child's own experience, the more recent the better; choosing books with pictures, pointing to the pictures and linking them with the story; explaining some unfamiliar words or ideas, using pictures where possible.

3. Phonological attraction

Choosing texts with strong phonological attraction, dependent on the vocal channel e.g. stories with onomatopoeia, assonance, alliteration, rhymes and repetition; singing songs, playing with rhymes and the component sounds of words; using games to do this e.g. 'I spy with my little eye something that rhymes with...'

4. Storyline

Books with a strong storyline help engage children's interest.

5. Active participation by the child

This is a fundamental principle of some importance. Allowing the child to choose the book to be read with help ensure the child's interest. What appeals tends to be very idiosyncratic, without any clear patterns.

6. The need for short books

In the case of children not used to being read to and with a short attention span for listening to stories. We need then to balance these

needs against the need for a strong storyline e.g. by choosing short versions of fairy stories and books with a strong element of repetition and redundancy.

7. The importance of repetition

Stories containing repetitive elements and re-reading of favourite stories help to strengthen children's learning.

STAGE TWO: PRINT-RELATED STRATEGIES

1. Learning that the print carries the message: print in use

The child should see the parent using print for a whole range of purposes and should have this point out to them. As far as possible the child should join in e.g. helping to make a cake from a recipe, helping write a shopping list and joining in the shopping, choosing programs from the TV guide, looking up football results in the paper, writing and answering invitations, sending letters and postcards.

During story-book time the child should lbe able to see the print and the parent should run a finger under it while reading.

2. Repetition-favourite stories

One of the most important principles is the value of repetition and favourite stories, as shown above. At this point oral cloze activities can be added to with simple written cloze in which easily predictable words in the text are covered up for the children to guess.

There is something to be said at this stage, for mixing short, predictable books with books included for the strength of their storyline.

3. Encouraging letter knowledge

The families are given alphabet friezes and are encouraged to watch 'Sesame St', which is very popular among them. Alphabet books are available for borrowing and parents are encouraged to buy their own.

4. Writing

From the start parents are encouraged to foster drawing, scribbling and writing, and are supplied with paper and pencils. In the act of writing the child may confront the writer-reader relationship in a way that makes clear the functions of writing and which may also begin to familiarise the child with letters and the graphophonic system.

Table One : Correlations between variables in the WHELP data set, 1989 - 1991

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1.	SES	1.0									
2.	Family Literacy Environment	.45 **	1.0								
3.	General family support for School learning	.35 **	.64**	1..0							
4.	Ethnicity	.17*	.49**	.41**	1.0						
5.	Parental Illiteracy	.30**	.46**	.49**	.60**	1.0					
6.	Child's interest in Print	.27**	.66**	.58**	.33**	.36**	1.0				
7.	Child's initial Print knowledge knowledge/awareness	.23**	.40**	.35**	.18**	.25**	.55**	1.0			
8.	Sulzby Pre-test	.14**	.30**	.24**	.28**	.16*	.24**	.30**	1.0		
9.	Sulzby Post-test	.20**	.26**	.26**	.34	.31**	.25**	.35**	.40**	1.0	
10.	School Literacy sceme	.34**	.33**	.40**	.19*	.23**	.43**	.60**	.35**	.47**	1.0

* = P<.05
** = P<.01

For correlations involving ethnicity and parental illeracy, the ns were in the range 164 - 176. For correlations involving School literacy the n was 82. For all other correlations, the ns were in the range 283 to 290.

Table 2 - Comparing SES and family environment variables in predicting children's literacy competence.

% variation in dependent variable predicted by:

1989 and 1990 data:	SES	FAMILY ENVIRONMENT	MINIMUM N
Sulzby Pre-test	6.75	10.66	155
Sulzby Post-test	4.17	11.08	
Sulzby test with predictable books	12.36	10.16	122
Performance test - print knowledge	3.11	5.09	
Print knowledge - mothers' reports	12.27	18.15	
Child interest in reading and writing	11.24	36.51	
Follow up to 1989 study:			
Total Griffin score	11.70	3.81	40
Score on first three levels	13.93	2.88	40
Score at first level	13.84	3.92	40

Table 3: Comparison of various groups on distribution of Sulzby post-test scores

	%			
	Project Groups		Comparison Groups	
	1989	1990	1989	1990 post test only
Oral language-like responses	42.4	65.1	91.5	84.3
Written language-like responses	57.5	34.0	8.7	15.6
	99.9	99.1	100.2	99.9

Table 4A: Comparison of 1989 Project and 1989 Comparison Group on Sulzby post-test controlling for the child's initial competence/interest and home background: analysis of variance.

	Mean	
	Project Group	1st Comparison Group
	5.40	3.69
	(n = 67)	(n = 32)

Co-variates	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F.
General Family Support	3.531	.874	.352
Sulzby pre-test	90.689	5.984	.000
Ethnicity	9.747	2.412	.124
Child's initial print knowledge	1.629	.403	.527
Child's initial interest	11.569	2.863	.094
Family literacy environment	.061	.015	.902
SES	3.944	.976	.326
Parental Illiteracy	.922	.228	.634
Age	6.195	1.533	.219
Main effects			
Group	127.564	31.572	.000

Table 4.B Comparison of 1990 Project and 1989 Comparison Group on Sulzby post-test controlling for: Sulzby Pre-test and child's interest in reading and writing.

	Mean	
1990 Project Group		1989 Comparison Group
	4.68	3.69
	(N = 50)	(N = 32)

Co-variates	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
General Family Support	.224	.101	.751
Sulzby Pre-test	33.923	15.362	.000
Ethnicity	1.281	.580	.449
Child's initial print knowledge	.355	.161	.690
Child's initial interest	10.044	4.548	.036
Family literacy environment	3.180	1.440	.234
SES	.438	.198	.657
Parental illiteracy	1.607	.725	.397
Age	.165	.075	.785
Main effects			
Group	16.132	7.305	.009

Table 4C: Comparison of 1991 Project and 1991 Comparison Group on Print Knowledge Performance Scale controlling for the child's initial competence/interest and home background: analysis of variance.

	Mean	
	Project Group	1st Comparison Group
	.05	-.13
	(n = 53)	(n = 28)

Co-variates	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F.
General Family Support	.243	1.507	.224
Sulzby pre-test	.013	.082	.776
Child's initial print knowledge	10.434	64.840	.000
Child's initial interest	.096	.598	.442
Family literacy environment	.056	.348	.557
SES	.034	.212	.647
Age	.239	1.484	.227
Main effects			
Group	1.257	7.811	.007

Table 5: Comparison of 1990 Project group with 1990 post-test only group on child's print knowledge/awareness and Sulzby post-test.

	Mean	
Outcome Variable	1990 Project Group	1990 post-test only Comparison Group
Sulzby	4.71	3.79
	(n = 56)	(n = 38)
Child's print knowledge performance test	0.13	0.18
	(n = 57)	(n = 42)

Main effect		Mean square	F	Sig. of F.
Group				
a)	Sulzby	19.362	6.604	.012
b)	Child's print knowledge performance test	2.241	4.519	.036

		Parents Want to Help Child's Education: YES	Parents Want to Help Child's Education: NO
Parents Attend School Regularly	YES	1	3
	NO	2	4

1. Enthusiasts
2. Low contact
3. Ambiguous
4. Uninvolved